

Empowering Social Workers to Define Social Work Career Success on Their Own Terms while Dismantling the Outdated, Narrow View of Social Work

A COLLECTIVE



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Nicki Sanders, MSW, is committed to career development, professional development, and organizational development. As Founder and CEO of Nicki Sanders Leadership Consulting, her mission is simple – to eliminate toxic workplaces by developing skilled, empathetic, and goal-oriented leaders who have the vision, support, and resources to create a culture where business prospers, and employees thrive individually and collectively. Nicki supports high-performing women of color in social work leadership in developing careers that feed their hearts, minds, and wallets. She has an extensive background in nonprofit management leading high-functioning, multi-disciplinary teams, volunteer recruitment and retention, and social impact programming. Nicki is an accomplished professor, coach, trainer, and group facilitator who has combined her gift for authentic relationships, Master of Social Work degree, and over 20 years of diverse work experience to create a life and career aligned with her values and purpose.

Nicki Sanders, MSW

Social Work Career Empowerment Coach dismantling the outdated, narrow view of social work.

Dear Social Workers,

Social work is a job. A profession. A career.

I do not go to work to volunteer. I am not a missionary. I am not a nun.

Just because I will no longer accept poverty wages doesn't mean social work is any less of a calling, passion, or purpose for me.

Social workers do NOT take a vow of poverty!

I repeat, social workers do NOT take a vow of poverty?

No matter how big your heart is or how great your social work skills are, you are not greater than because you have the privilege of accepting low wages.

Social workers deserve to be paid WELL for our expertise - just like other professionals.

Surely with our focus on anti-oppression and nonjudgment, we can see that it is a privilege to joyfully and proudly accept low wages.

It is a privilege to have the audacity to shame other social workers who have paid for two degrees, professional development, and in many instances licensing because they expect and require to live well.

Living wages and healthy workplaces aren't negotiable.

Who decided that if you're a social worker you're mandated to a life of poverty?

Who decided that if you're a social worker self-sacrifice is a part of the job?

I want to have a conversation with the social work gatekeepers who decided that you aren't a good social worker if you reject a life of personal financial struggle.

The expectation that I can and should give my best to anyone at my own expense is outrageous. Even NASW added self-care to the Code of Ethics. Remember Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs? Boundaries sound familiar?

I can't social work at my best if I'm exhausted from having to work 3 jobs, or can't afford decent transportation to get to work every day, or my lights have been turned off, or I can't pay my mortgage.

Why would the expectation be that I advocate for my clients and not myself?

Why am I undeserving of a life void of struggle because I chose to help others improve their quality of life?

We're in 2023, we can stop glorifying poverty now!

Originally posted on LinkedIn in February 2023

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I recognize that women of color in social work leadership struggle with visibility and lack of confidence in the workplace. As a Black woman in social work leadership who previously dimmed her light, I am passionate about helping women increase their confidence and level up in their careers.

March is **National Social Work Month**. To commemorate Social Work Month in 2018, I launched a **Social Work Month Blog Series** where I interviewed social workers in diverse industries about their social work education and careers. The purpose of my Social Work Month blog series was to:

- Promote the social work profession
- Show the diversity in social work careers
- Eliminate stereotypes about the social work profession
- Celebrate social workers who are making a difference in the world

My **Social Work Month Blog Series** was published annually from 2018 - 2021. My annual blog series themes were:

2021 - Women Social Work Entrepreneurs

2020 - Millennial Women Social Workers

2019 - Women Social Work Managers

2018 - Women in Social Work

In 2022, I planned to interview women in social work education for the continuation of my annual Social Work Month Blog Series. I had amazing women lined up, but the timing just didn't feel quite right. When I feel myself drift into this type of space I always pause and ask myself if I am procrastinating out of fear or if elevation is occurring. It wasn't fear. That social work month was different. Spring was in the air and I felt like I was blossoming. The days were getting longer, and the weather was warmer so I wanted to be outdoors. I wanted to experience the freedom of nature and the freedom of doing work that I love in the way that I love it. In hindsight, I also finally felt a release of the weight of the pandemic in a different way. I honored my inner guidance and did not schedule those social work educator interviews.

The interviews can be found on my website under the category of '**Conversations with Nicki Sanders**'.

In 2023, I commemorated **National Social Work Month** with a daily social work video. With the collaboration from other social workers on LinkedIn, I also created **Social Work A to Z Lists** which listed different social work industries for every letter of the alphabet. I then added social work job titles for every letter of the alphabet.

The full lists can be found on the **Resources** page on my website.

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My Social Work Month Blog Series was published annually on my website from 2018 - 2021.

2021 - Women Social Work Entrepreneurs

Katherine Spinney, MSW

Portia Rouse, LCSW-C

Kenia Maldonado, LMSW

2020 - Millennial Women Social Workers

Shante' Johnson, MSW

Erica Anderson, LMSW

Tiffany Walker, LSW

2019 - Women Social Work Managers

Ashley Willis, LCSW-C

Lisa R. Savage, LCSW

Shandra Parks, PhD, LGSW, CFSW

Crystal McLeod, LCSW, BCD

Vera Kurdian, LCSW-C

2018 - Women in Social Work

Laila El-Asmar, LCSW-C

Ebony Davis, MPA, MSW, LCSW-C

Sydney Wilson, MSW

Susan Shewchuk, LCSW-C

Andrea Imafidon, LMSW, LCSW

Tacarra Cook, BSW, MA

Anim Aweh, MSW, ACSW

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NOTE: Social work skills are highly transferable

I'm challenging the outdated, narrow view of social work so that more social workers realize they can do anything they want to do professionally with their social work degree.

Eco-Social Work | Environmental Social Work | Green Social Work

Social workers possess valuable skills including advocacy, building rapport, active listening, critical thinking, and cultural competency. Macro social work skills include legislative advocacy, program planning, community organizing, resource development, and grant writing. And the list goes on...

Social work education, training, and skill development place the social work profession in a perfect position to advance our connection with nature and promote environmental justice and sustainable development.

Social work is in a perfect position to encourage spending time outdoors as a self-care practice, exercise opportunity, and mood booster.

Social work is in a perfect position to address food insecurity, food system health, and food deserts.

Social work is in a perfect position to champion clean water, fresh air, and forestation.

Social work is in a perfect position to advocate for affordable housing, energy-efficient appliances, and investing in renewable energy.

Social work is in a perfect position to promote the benefits of home gardening, regenerative farming, and growing indoor plants.

Social work is in a perfect position to raise awareness about decreasing your carbon footprint, upcycling, and sourcing local products.

Social work is in a perfect position to encourage community engagement, cooperative economics, and intergenerational living

BONUS: A social work license may not be required for many green jobs.

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What I know for sure is that social work students and new social workers are not the only professionals who are confused or feel stuck or unprepared about how to advance their social work careers.

It can be easy for seasoned social workers to fall into the trap of doing the same old job search things in the same old ways, so they need a refresh. Burnout and compassion may also cause seasoned social workers to make a shift in how, where, and with whom they social work.

Let's explore employment in the federal government. It's important to note that the Veteran's Administration (VA) is not the only government agency that hires social workers in 'social work positions'.

Your social work education and experience are valuable to many federal agencies.
You have highly transferable skills. Your social work skills are high-income skills.

Do you have an interest in policy, advocacy, data, research, program development and management, and health/public health?

Explore employment with these 3 agencies as a starting point:

1. Health & Human Services (HHS)
2. United States Agency for International Development (USAID)
3. Department of Homeland Security (DHS)

Do you have an interest in education, housing, health, immigration, mental health, or community development?

Explore employment with these 3 agencies as a starting point:

1. Department of Education
2. Housing and Urban Development
3. Customs and Border Protection

Do you have an interest in food security, agriculture, finance, politics, climate change, employee assistance programs, travel, workforce development, or research?

Explore employment with these 3 agencies as a starting point:

1. Department of Agriculture (USDA)
2. Department of Commerce
3. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)

****This is not an exhaustive list.**

NOTE: Also consider similar local and state government positions.